

Daughters of the Digital Empire

Book One of
Moonlight Hearts

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Content Warnings

Sexual content

- 0 none.
- 1 kissing and romance
- 2 heavy petting, implied sex
- 3 non explicit sexual content**
- 4 explicit sexual content
- 5 non consensual content

Violent content

- 0 none.
- 1 action with no death seen
- 2 violence with no blood or gore
- 3 violence with blood and mild gore**
- 4 extreme violence, explicit gore
- 5 sexual assault

List of Trigger Warnings

Sexual assault
Abuse ✓
Child abuse/pedophilia/incest
Animal cruelty or animal death
Self-harm and suicide ✓
Eating disorders, body hatred, and fat phobia
Violence ✓
Pornographic content
Kidnapping and abduction ✓
Death or dying ✓
Pregnancy/childbirth
Miscarriages/abortion
Blood ✓
Mental illness
Ableism
Racism and racial slurs
Sexism and misogyny ✓
Classism ✓
Hateful language directed at religious groups
Transphobia and trans misogyny
Homophobia and heterosexism
Swears or curses ✓
Nudity ✓
Murder ✓
Torture

Chapter 10: A Long Walk

As I walked towards the front gate, Manfred caught up with me.

“Lady, a letter from Duke Delmar arrived by messenger.” He handed me an envelope and a paper knife. I cut the envelope open and returned the envelope and the paper knife to Manfred.

“Thank you Manfred. I appreciate you getting this to me before I left.”

Manfred caught himself mid-eyebrow raise, and switched to a smile. “You are most welcome Lady.”

As Manfred departed, I opened the letter and read.

“Dear Lady Ren. I am writing as I could not find an appropriate time yesterday to discuss this with you alone. We share a common cause: your cousin Lynn. I care for her. We have never known each other well. But we could not avoid seeing each other at social functions growing up. I have harbored something of a school boy crush on Lynn for the past four years. And I understand that she may return my affection. But my own affection compels me to oppose her choice to wed Prince Wulfric. I can see that you feel as I do, and are willing to go to great lengths to protect your cousin. Consider me your ally. My title does restrict what I can do without causing an incident. But there are things which I can do within the Duchy, which no one else can do. If you need my help, please ask. Your Co-conspirator- Duke Leon Delmar.”

I folded the letter and slid it into my bodice. Then I stepped out from the castle keep.

I made my way through the courtyard to the barbican leading out beyond the castle walls. The castle had a medieval gothic style. The city of Octavo had developed around the castle, and was one of the oldest cities on Ys. The courtyard smelled of leather, oil, and horse manure. The clopping of hooves on stone dominated the soundscape.

Fiona stood waiting at the gate of Castle Octavian when I exited. She had dressed in sturdy black trousers and a matching long coat. She wore a crimson sash across her waist, bound by a silver cylindrical clasp. The clasp looked like the one she had worn yesterday. She also wore a white linen button up shirt with a detachable imperial high collar. She wore the shirt with the top four buttons open, exposing more than a little cleavage. I bit my lip. That fashion choice couldn’t be accidental. Did she want me looking at her? She must want that, mustn’t she? I thought back to her previous outfit.

Were low cut necklines her style? Mother had thought that Fiona was straight, but I knew better from Lynn's playthroughs.

I waved at Fiona as I approached. She waved in response.

"Good morning Lady Ren," She smiled. "Did you not think trousers would be more practical? In the event that things turn violent, your skirt is lovely but dangerous."

I looked down at my kelly green pleated maxi dress. The dress was high waisted and reached down to my ankles. But it did provide more range of motion than most dresses.

"Don't I look good in my dress?" I asked, I spun to flare the dress and the mantle.

When I stopped my spin, I noticed Fiona was blushing.

She coughed, "You look splendid. I did not mean to imply otherwise. I rarely imply anything. My concern was your safety."

"Thank you. You look amazing too. I love your shirt," I paused, "I'm not staring at your chest, I promise."

Fiona grinned, "I did not wear this shirt by coincidence. But I do worry about your safety. Can you protect yourself in that dress?"

Wait, did she say that she didn't wear the shirt open by coincidence? Had I heard that right? I shook my head, "I can't, but I couldn't anyway. I'm not a combatant. That's your department. You handle the fighting, and I'll handle the screaming and cowering and flailing of arms."

"You have had no combat training?" Fiona asked. She shifted her weight. I dragged my eyes back up to her face, ignoring her exposed collarbone and cleavage.

I didn't know if the rival had received any combat training. She never used it in any path through Moonlight Hearts. But I knew that I didn't have any combat training. So I shook my head.

"That seems like an oversight. Anyone who might lead a house one day must be able to defend themselves. Worse, if war with Hyperborea does arrive, your lack of training will expose you to danger. At least you will not find yourself on the front lines."

"It sounds like you would though? Shouldn't you be in a command position far from the front lines? You're a countess, after all."

"I am also one of the best on the ground commanders Ys has at her disposal. In the event of a war. I will be leading troops, but leading from the front rather than from the rear. But you need not worry about this or your lack of combat training. Today I will protect you. But still, training would be good, should you ever find yourself a baroness."

"You're the second person to mention that. There's little danger of me leading the House. I'm fifth in line to be baron, or rather baroness. My cousin Carolynn, my father, and both my siblings are ahead of me in the line of succession. I'm ahead of my mother and my aunt because they married into the family. But otherwise I'm pretty low on the scale of importance. That's why Carolynn has suitors and I don't."

"You may still find yourself married to a title lord or lady, and thus a target for kidnapping and ransom. And indeed, I wanted to speak with you about that as well. Carolynn is first in line for the Barony, which would be a noticeable increase in status for myself. She also has a reputation for being a good person. And so I decided to present myself as a suitor for her hand. But that ship seems to have sailed. Would you agree?"

"It definitely has, assuming our task here does what Lynn hopes it will."

"You hope for failure?"

"I'm afraid for her safety if she marries Wulfric."

"And yet you are helping her achieve her goal," Fiona noted. "Why do so?"

"She asked me to do it. I wouldn't have volunteered. But she asked me."

"And this brings me back to my point," Fiona said. "You are loyal. And that is an attractive trait. Lady Carolynn will likely marry Prince Wulfric. And if she does not, then I expect she will accept Leon's inevitable proposal."

"You noticed that too?" I asked.

"She kissed him. She did not kiss either of the two other suitors present. And so Vincent and I find ourselves without much purpose."

"Yeah," I agreed. "At least you didn't have to cross the ocean to get rejected."

"Indeed. But I do not plan to leave rejected, at least not if I can help it," Fiona said.

"I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"I met another lady at the party. This one is a more equal match to myself. And I find her more attractive than Lady Carolynn on many levels. And bold. I like bold." She paused, and then added, "I also like blondes."

"Oh," I whispered, "You're talking about me."

"Indeed. I am terrible at being subtle. But I prefer directness in any case. You showed great bravery when you confronted Wulfric. And you showed great loyalty to Lady Carolynn even when she was not loyal to herself. You are beautiful. And looking at you makes my heart beat faster."

I felt my face grow hot. I knew my skin had grown as red as her sash. How did compliments about a body I had received by chance still land like a falling anvil. I tried to speak, and managed a squeak instead.

"Are you alright?" Fiona asked.

"I'm fine," I managed to squeak. Then I took a few slow breaths, "I'm not used to romance. I'm not good at it."

"But you have quite the reputation as a man-eater and a heartbreaker. I do not understand."

Of course, the rival. That was her reputation in the game. What to say? What to say? Fiona waited as I mulled things over. Finally I settled on an answer.

"I do have that reputation," I started, "But those were men. I don't like men. I have no romantic interest in them at all. So it doesn't hit the same. Also, flirting with a man is simple, they aren't complicated creatures. And House Octavian expects me to produce an heir. And so I've played the role. I've done what they expect of me, and hated it the whole time."

“You do not like men at all? That must have made things unpleasant. My preference is for ladies, but I enjoy the company of men. But we are drifting off topic. I wish to court you. Would you be agreeable to that?”

“You’re okay with the leftovers?” I asked.

“You are not leftovers. Lynn was the strategic choice. You are my choice of preference.”

Thoughts of Amy leaped to the front of my mind. She had said marrying Fiona would be wise. But I suspected she wasn’t happy at the prospect, especially so soon after we had begun our relationship. It was such a simple question, and yet I didn’t know how to answer. Amy had said that we could deal with how a courtship would affect our relationship when it happened. Well now it was happening. I had expected that nothing would happen until I said something. And yet here I was, being pursued. I had to admit that being pursued felt nice. Of course, it was only a courtship. I could still turn her down later. That was the point of a courtship.

I nodded.

“Countess Fiona, I would be honored to have you court me.”

“Thank you. Although that response took longer than I expected.”

I slumped a little, “Nothing related to me is simple. I hope you don’t mind unnecessary complications.”

“I will manage. Now we should complete this unpleasant task.”

I felt a mood-whiplash from her sudden shift in focus. But I nodded and we set out for the Hyperborean embassy. The Embassy was on the border of Octavo and Myrddhin City. The two cities had expanded over the centuries until they now touched. Octavo occupied the strategic high ground necessary for a castle. Myrddhin City occupied the coastline of the calmest bay on Ys. The Embassy was a massive Great House with a single open room. The wooden structure somehow looked ancient compared to the stone buildings around it. The building was three stories tall, despite there being no rooms beyond the great room. The upper two floors stood empty in concession to the steep angled roof, and its many flourishes. The craftsmen had carved animal figures into the roofing shingles. They had also carved knotwork on many of the logs used for walls. I had the sense of the embassy as an ancient being, waiting for its prey.

As we approached the building, Fiona stopped and put her hand out to stop me. I stopped, but her hand brushed my breast and I shivered. Fiona drew her hand back.

"I am sorry. I should have asked this earlier. Do you have a mystic gift?"

I had forgotten about the mystic gifts. The mechanic felt tacked on in the game. It was only used for a handful of puzzles. But I did remember that the rival had a mystic gift. The rival had the mystic gift of precognition. The designers used her mystic gift to explain how she knew where the player would be. If I had the gift, I hadn't experienced it yet.

"I have the gift of Precognition," I said. "So don't hold out much hope of it being useful. Activating it on purpose is difficult."

"Understood. I too have a mystic gift. I can see auras."

"Then couldn't you see that I had a mystic gift?" I asked.

"No, I could only sense that you held the potential to have a gift."

"Is it always on?"

She shook her head, "No. but activating it simple. It feels similar to focusing one's eye by conscious effort."

"So your gift will be more useful inside than mine. Because unless I get a spontaneous vision, I won't be using my gift there at all."

"You have no combat training." Fiona said, and I winced. "You have no gift you can use in the upcoming confrontation. You have nothing to gain and much to lose from this confrontation. And yet, you walk into the wolf's den. And you do so without flinching."

"Oh, I'm flinching." I said, and tried to smile.

"You have everything to lose and nothing to gain from this. " Fiona continued, "You do this only because you hold yourself to a code of honor. You are magnificent."

I cringed at the praise, but blushed all the same, "I'm a hot mess, you mean. But I'm flattered by your compliments."

"They are not compliments. They are observations. Now, let us get inside."

We approached the gate. Two guards in serpent scale armor guarded the entrance. They had the Pillar Tree of Hyperborea embossed on the guards of their sabers. They wore fur lined cloaks on their shoulders and spangenhelms on their heads. As we approached, their smell struck me. They radiated the smell of rancid oil.

The guards stopped us with crossed spears blocking the door. "State your business with Hyperborea."

"I am Lady Karen Octavian. And I am here to deliver a message to his royal highness Prince Wulfric from the Lady Carolynn Octavian."

"The Prince is not here," The guard said.

"We know," I said, "Nobody will admit to knowing where he is. But we trust that the ambassador will be able to deliver the message."

The guard was silent. I looked at the other guard standing without a word. Finally the first guard spoke again.

"Wait here. I will return."

Five minutes later the guard was back. He saluted us. "Ladies, follow me please."

We entered the great house, and the smell of unwashed men hit like rotten vegetables flung in my face. The interior was hot. The temperature had risen as too many people engaged in raucous drinking and games in the great room. I opened my mantle to ease the effect of the heat. The guard power walked us to a mouse of a man with prominent teeth who sat in a chair near the front door. He dressed in the garb of a servant. So I assumed that he was a doorman. He nodded to us.

"Weapons please ladies." He pointed at a weapons rack behind him.

I shrugged, "I'm unarmed."

The doorman shook his head, "My request includes your bodice dagger, Lady."

I shook my head, and grasped the neckline of my blouse and pulled forward, “I have no bodice dagger. I have no derringer. I have nothing. I couldn’t use it anyway. Would you like to check?”

I glared at him. The mouse man shrank back in his chair.

Fiona stepped forward, “She does not need a weapon. I am here.”

She reached into her jacket, and rustled about for a moment. Then she produced a cavalry saber. The door man nodded. Fiona reached back into her jacket. After a moment she produced a rondel dagger, a skinning knife, and a stiletto. The doorman raised his eyebrows, but took the blades. Fiona reached back into her jacket and this continued. Fiona produced a bandoleer of six throwing daggers. Then she produced two flintlock pistols and one pepperbox derringer pistol. Next she handed over a pair of brass knuckles. Then she surrendered an iron wrapped garrote wire. By the end, the doorman looked terrified. He cringed when Fiona handed him something. And he flinched when she reached back into her jacket.

She handed him the garrote wire, and announced, “That is all.”

The doorman sighed, “Wonderful, now go on in.”

I noticed that Fiona still wore her sash clasp. I said nothing.

We walked through the open hall towards a throne at the back. Tables and chairs sat without pattern or reason in the open space of the hall. People sat on benches together. Most of them were eating. All of them carried weapons. If this turned ugly, they outnumbered us ten to one or worse.

A lean man with long black hair and hungry eyes watched us from the throne. He wore a gray frock coat with a gray waistcoat. Beside the throne, a woman in servant’s attire knelt with her arms spread. Her shirt lay unlaced, her back exposed. I saw crisscrossing wounds on the exposed back. Somebody had tied her arms to a pair of posts anchored in the dirt, and the ropes trapped her in position. A heavy set man with a shaved head wearing leather armor struck the woman across the back with a leather cat of nine tails. The woman gasped, but did not cry out. I had a sense that the punishment would have been worse if she had, and that she knew this. The man on the throne did not look at the servant girl.

The guard stopped us five feet from the throne.

"His grace, Duke Olaf Sigurdson- ambassador to The Kingdom of Ys. Your grace, I present Lady Karen Octavian and her attendant."

I curtsied and Fiona gave an awkward bow. Duke Sigurdson lounged on the throne. He looked at us like he was sizing us up for the stew pot.

"I am told that you have a message for my Prince. And that you wish to give it to me."

"Yes, your grace. To be precise, I have two messages for his royal highness. I have one message from Lady Carolynn Octavian. And I have one message from myself."

He sighed, "Very well, deliver your messages."

I nodded, "From my cousin: Lady Carolynn Octavian. She says that she accepts his royal highness's offer of marriage. And she will be his wife if he will still have her."

Duke Sigurdson raised his eyebrows, then nodded.

"From myself. I apologize for my behavior at the recent party and I beg forgiveness from his royal highness. I am sorry for the insult I caused him and wish to resolve any harsh feelings that exist between us. These are my messages. I am finished."

"Are you?" Duke Sigurdson said with a smile that curled his lip to a sneer. "Very well. I will attempt to have this message delivered. If there is nothing else, you are dismissed."

As we walked back to the front, I heard the duke speak to the man with the shaved head.

"Has she learned her lesson yet?"

"Not sure Your Grace, but any more and she'll pass out."

"We don't want that. Then she can't appreciate her punishment. Let her rest then. You may continue once you are certain she can withstand more punishment. Next time she will not drop my serving bowl."

I ground my teeth, but kept walking. There was nothing I could do in this situation.

The doorman piled Fiona's weapons into her arms and we left with her carrying them. Outside, Fiona wrapped the bandoleer around the other items and slung them under her left arm.

I looked at Fiona, "Did that feel as though it went too smoothly to you?"

"It did," Fiona answered, "I suspect the other shoe has yet to drop."